

04/16/21 Friday

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Pentagon Will Attempt Hypersonic Missile Shootdown Using US Navy's SM-6 Missile
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Russia and China both have multiple hypersonic weapon systems in use or advanced development, while the US has none. The seemingly unstoppable weapons travel faster than Mach 5, or roughly 3,800 miles per hour.

A senior Pentagon official told lawmakers on Wednesday that the Missile Defense Agency is preparing a test in which a Standard Missile (SM)-6 will attempt to shoot down a mock hypersonic missile later this year. The ultra-fast weapons are notoriously hard to track and harder to down.

Director of Defense Research and Engineering for Research and Technology Barbara [McQuiston](#) told a Senate defense committee on Wednesday that the MDA and US Navy had already seen promising signs the advanced SM-6 missile could shoot down "an advanced maneuvering threat-representative target" - a capability they intend to test later this year and continue developing into 2024.

"We are also working with the Missile Defense Agency to accelerate a comprehensive layered defeat capability against adversary tactical hypersonic weapons including kinetic defense in the terminal and glide phases of flight, as well as left-of-launch strike of missile launch complexes," McQuiston further said. [Left-of-launch](#) refers to sabotaging missile programs during their development or even individual missiles on their launch sites to prevent them from being fielded or used. It can also include pre-emptive strikes.

As [The War Zone](#) noted, "advanced maneuvering threat" is Pentagon lingo for a hypersonic boost glide vehicle, the unpowered ultra-maneuverable device that nimbly delivers the warhead to its target after being accelerated beyond Mach 5 by a rocket engine.

Hypersonic weapons are [notoriously hard to spot](#) and track. The existing Space-Based Infrared System the Pentagon uses to pinpoint ballistic missile launches works by spotting the intense heat from their rocket engines, which stands out against the background heat from the Earth. However, hypersonic missiles don't use their rocket engines for nearly as long as ballistic missiles, giving the satellites less time to figure out their trajectory before the engine cuts off and the unpowered glide vehicle "goes cold," disappearing from infrared view. To fill this dangerous hole in US defenses, the Space Force [has contracted for](#) a new generation of wide- and [medium-field-of-view](#) satellites.

It's possible the radars on US anti-ballistic missile systems, like the Patriot and THAAD, could also track hypersonic weapons. However, it's one thing to spot a hypersonic missile - it's wholly another to shoot one down. [Sergei Surovikin, commander](#) of the Russian Aerospace Forces, has said the forthcoming S-500 Prometheus air defense system will be able to shoot down hypersonic weapons and noted that "a certain amount of tweaking" [would allow S-400 Triumf](#) and 9K37 Buk missile systems to do so as well. To build an anti-hypersonic missile, though, one

has to build another hypersonic missile first, and the US' record on this front leaves much to be desired. Earlier this month, the delayed and much-anticipated first test-firing of the AGM-183A Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon ([ARRW](#)) [didn't happen](#) after the missile failed to separate from its parent aircraft. It would have been the US' first hypersonic weapons test. Meanwhile, Russia and [China already have](#) several hypersonic [missiles in service](#) or advanced stages of development.

The present versions of the SM-6 in use have a top speed of roughly 3,500 miles per hour, but according to [The War Zone](#), the Block IB missiles are getting a substantial engine upgrade that could push them into hypersonic speed.

Russia also has one of the few radars capable of tracking a hypersonic weapon. The Rezonans-N very high frequency radar is reportedly capable of detecting hypersonic glide vehicles up to 372 miles away, according to [the Barents Observer](#). It is a modified version of the Rezonans ballistic missile tracking radar, which is specialized for tracking objects up to 20 times the speed of sound. Roughly half a dozen Rezonans-N radars have been installed on Russia's northern coast between the Kola Peninsula and Novaya Zemlya in the last two years, but none are believed to be operational yet.

That said, if any missile in the US arsenal could take down a hypersonic weapon, it would be the SM-6. Notoriously versatile, what was originally designed as an air defense missile has been adapted to anti-ballistic missile duties and can even hit surface targets. Another missile in the SM family, the SM-3, was even used to [shoot down a satellite](#) in 2008. In November, the [US Army announced](#) it was adapting the SM-6 into a ground-launched version to cover mid-range strike needs.

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Video: Israeli Military Says Struck Targets in Gaza in Response to Earlier Rocket Launch by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

For the second day in a row, rockets have been fired from Gaza into Israeli territory on Friday. Thursday was Israeli Independence Day.

The rocket set off alarms in Holit kibbutz and Sdeh Avraham southeast of the Gaza Strip, near the Egyptian border, according to local reports. However, it reportedly landed in an open field without causing injury. There was no word about whether or not the Iron Dome air defense system activated or attempted to engage the projectile.

Later, the IDF said it struck targets in the Gaza Strip in retaliation for an earlier launch into its territory.

On Thursday, another rocket fired into Israel [also landed harmlessly](#) in a field. However, IDF fighter jets still carried out [several airstrikes](#) in eastern and central Gaza early Friday morning, which is also the first Friday of Holy Ramadan.

Gaza remains under a near-total blockade by Israel, cutting off its access to basic necessities such as fuel and medicine. Nearly half the population is unemployed and a similar number are in poverty, while airstrikes slowly crumble its buildings and institutions away. With roughly 1.85

million people crammed into just 362 square kilometers, Gaza is the 3rd most densely populated polity in the world; the combined conditions have led to Gaza being called the world's largest open-air prison.

While more than half of Israeli citizens have received at least one dose of a SARS-CoV-2 vaccine, the disease continues to [rage inside Gaza](#), where more than 20,000 active cases of COVID-19 have been reported and 35% of tests are positive - an astoundingly high rate of transmission.

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Biden Walks Back Promise to Raise Trump-Era Low Refugee Acceptance Cap
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President Joe Biden has received extensive criticism from the left for the continuation of widely-hated immigration policies left over from his predecessor, Donald Trump, including holding immigrant youth in detention facilities and continuing the wait-in-Mexico policy. On Friday, a [new directive signed](#) by Biden aims to speed the processing of asylum applications but will keep the maximum number who can be accepted annually at the same level set by the Trump administration.

Just two months ago on February 4, Biden pledged to [make a "down payment"](#) on the goal of increasing the cap to 125,000 per year for the administration's first full fiscal year, which begins in October. He clarified [several days later](#) that he would go halfway for the rest of fiscal year 2021 and raise the cap to 62,500.

According to the [New York Times](#), the US government has already vetted roughly 35,000 refugees who have applied to enter the US from refugee camps around the globe - camps they will now be required to stay in.

A senior administration official [told The Hill](#) that Biden's order was an improvement that "is needed to offer protection to vulnerable refugees who could not access the program under the previous one."

That answer mirrors a similar logic at play across the Biden administration's immigration policies, where deportations have continued unabated since Trump left office in January, but now under the guise of public health necessity. The [National Immigrant Justice Center](#) has noted that deportations have actually increased under Biden.

White House Press Secretary [Jen Psaki has defended](#) the practice by saying the administration needs time to build a system that treats refugees and asylum seekers "with humanity and respect." She said on Thursday that Biden "remains committed to raising the refugee cap." Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN), a Somali refugee who arrived in the US as a child in 1995, penned a furious letter to Biden on Friday in which she said the country's refugee policy "remains unacceptably draconian and discriminatory."

"As a refugee, I know finding a home is a matter of life or death for children around the world," Omar said in a Friday tweet that included the letter. She called it "shameful" that Biden was "reneging on a key promise to welcome refugees" after Reps. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Pramila

Jaypal (D-WA), and herself had recently called on him to increase the cap. More than 40 other lawmakers co-signed the letter.

Through each of the four years of Trump's presidency, he lowered the refugee cap from the 110,000 set by his predecessor, Barack Obama, in 2016. The final low of 15,000 was the lowest since the cap was introduced in 1980.

The decision came roughly a month before a hotly contested presidential election that Trump lost to Biden. On the campaign trail, Trump cast refugees as both a burden and a threat, in particular invoking their apparent dangers while speaking in Omar's home state of Minnesota. [He told attendees Biden](#) would "turn Minnesota into a refugee camp, overwhelming public resources, overcrowding schools and inundating your hospitals," by bringing foreigners "from the most dangerous countries in the world, including Yemen, Syria, and your favorite country, Somalia."

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Video: One Injured in Shooting at Briarwood Mall in Ann Arbor, Michigan
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Authorities with the Ann Arbor Police Department (AAPD) were dispatched to Briarwood Mall on Friday following reports of shots fired around 3:20 p.m. local time. The shopping center has since been locked down.

The AAPD statement Friday evening detailing that a single victim with a non-life-threatening injury. The male victim is reportedly in stable condition at Michigan Medicine, the University of Michigan hospital.

At this time, police believe the shooting was an isolated incident. No additional victims have been identified.

Local outlet WXYZ-TV provided live aerial video of the scene in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The AAPD has confirmed that there is no longer an active shooter at the scene. However, members of the public have been instructed to avoid the area.

"Briarwood Mall is closed due to a police investigation," AAPD [tweeted](#) at 5:37 p.m. local time on Friday. "Please avoid the area for now."

Local outlet MLive reported that two people were taken into police custody from a nearby Romano's Macaroni Grill. However, it's unclear if their detainment was related to the mall shooting.

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FedEx Shooting: Feds Searching Home of Alleged Gunman, Identified as 19-Year-Old Male - Photos

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Indiana's Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD) confirmed last night that eight people, including the suspect, were shot and killed at the city's FedEx Ground-Plainfield Operation Center. Local and federal authorities are still searching for a possible motive. During a Friday morning news conference, IMPD Deputy Chief Craig McCartt provided reporters with a brief timeline of events, based on eyewitness accounts and a preliminary investigation. "Suspect came to the facility, and when he came there he got out of his car and, pretty quickly, started some random shooting outside the facility," the deputy chief said. "There was no confrontation with anyone that was there, there was no disturbance, there was no argument. He just appeared to randomly start shooting."

After receiving reports around 11 p.m. local time on Thursday night, responding officers arrived to a "chaotic and active crime scene" that had multiple victims, both living and deceased, according to McCartt.

The deputy chief confirmed the shooting began in the parking lot and ended in the FedEx facility. It was reported that four bodies were found inside and another four bodies, including that of the alleged gunman, were located inside the facility.

Authorities believe the gunman died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

McCartt noted it would be "several hours" before the crime lab could finish processing evidence from the scene.

Paul Keenan, special agent in charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Indianapolis Field office, emphasized that it would be "premature" to speculate about a motive at the current time. At the same time, authorities do not believe there is any related threat remaining.

"FBI personnel are assisting the crime scene, conducting interviews, assisting on the search of the suspect's home and will provide any technical expertise requested," Keenan said.

Within hours after the news conference, two law enforcement officials familiar with the matter confirmed to the [Associated Press](#) that the shooter has been identified as Brandon Scott Hole, a 19-year-old resident of Indiana.

A number of items, including a desktop computer and other electronics, were recovered from the suspect's residence.

As local and federal authorities attempt to find a possible motive for the mass shooting, IMPD Police Chief Randal Taylor has revealed that a "significant" number of employees at the FedEx facility belong to the Sikh community.

The Sikh Coalition, a Sikh-American advocacy group, has confirmed that "Sikh community members are among those injured and killed by the gunman in Indianapolis."

"For now, we are choosing not to share unverified information about the identity of any specific victims, nor speculate on the motive or identity of the shooter," the [group said](#). "On the latter point, we expect that authorities will conduct a full investigation - including the possibility of bias as a factor."

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'Over 100 Requests to Employees': State Dept. Watchdog Declares Pompeo, Wife Violated Ethics Rules

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo raised eyebrows last year after admitting that he requested then-President Donald Trump to remove State Department Inspector General Steve Linick from his post. At the time of his termination, Linick was conducting an investigation into personal errand requests from Pompeo and his wife, Susan Pompeo.

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) for the US Department of State issued a [report](#) Friday detailing that it found that both Pompeo and his wife made several requests of departmental employees that "were inconsistent with Department ethics rules and the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch."

The accompanying review - based on a 2019 [whistleblower complaint](#) alleging Pompeo's misuse of State Department resources - revealed Pompeo "hired a political appointee" for the purpose of carrying out "tasks of personal nature to benefit him and Mrs. Pompeo."

The aforementioned appointee, as well as State Department staffers, were made to carry out a number of tasks, which the report divided into three broad categories: "requests to pick up personal items, planning of events unrelated to the Department's mission, and miscellaneous personal requests."

One example highlighted within the OIG report detailed that, in December 2019, Mrs. Pompeo emailed a senior adviser and asked, "I'm wondering if we are sending the last of our personal [Christmas] cards out, who will be there to help me?"

Both the senior adviser and a senior foreign service adviser spent time that weekend enveloping, addressing and mailing the Pompeos' personal Christmas cards.

When asked about the incident, Pompeo told the OIG that he thought the request was "proper because it was only a 'tiny task.'" Also, he reimbursed the State Department for printing costs, according to the report.

Another section of the report stated that, on several occasions in 2018 and 2019, Pompeo and his wife asked the senior adviser to provide care for their dog. The requests included: "picking the dog up from their home and dropping it off with a boarder; picking it up from the boarder and returning it to their home; and stopping by their home to let the dog out when they were not at home."

The OIG determined the tasks had no connection to official State Department business, despite being performed by department personnel "during duty and non-duty hours. The Pompeos did not reimburse the subordinate employees for their non-duty time when performing these tasks."

The OIG advised the State Department to update its guidance regarding the use of departmental funds for personal entertainment, dinners and gifts to US citizens. It also called for the addition of examples of both appropriate and inappropriate requests in the Protection Handbook.

The third recommendation called for the publication of "guidance on the use of a subordinate's time for tasks of a personal nature, including direction concerning what to do and who to contact when a Department employee is tasked with an inappropriate request."

"The Department concurred with all three recommendations," the report detailed.

William Burck, Pompeo's lawyer, issued a scathing response to the OIG draft report, claiming in a now-public letter that the report "in its current form is not fit for publication."

"The poor quality of the report bespeaks not merely unprofessionalism in its drafting but also bias, which we are concerned may be politically motivated," he wrote, on behalf of his client. "It is no secret that some staff in the OIG strongly disagreed with personnel decisions made during Mr. Pompeo's tenure, including the termination of former State Department Inspector General Steve Linick."

The attorney also requested access to the information regarding "these supposed 'over 100 requests.'" According to Pompeo's lawyer, the report did not properly emphasize that "there is no allegation that the Pompeos improperly used State Department funds at any time" because the drafters conceded "the Pompeos paid for personal items themselves."

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Liberty University Files Lawsuit Against Jerry Falwell Jr., Seeks Millions in Damages
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Last year, Jerry Falwell, Jr. abruptly resigned from Liberty University, one day after a pool attendant revealed to the public that he allegedly had a yearslong sexual relationship with Falwell's wife, Becki, and that Falwell had taken on the role of a voyeur. Falwell has repeatedly rejected the allegations.

Liberty University, an evangelical Christian institution based in Lynchburg, Virginia, has filed a lawsuit against Falwell, accusing the private school's former president and chancellor of undermining its moral standards.

The lawsuit, which was filed on Thursday at the Lynchburg Circuit Court, accuses Falwell of having committed three offenses, specifically that the once influential official had breached his contract, fiduciary duty and allegedly violated his statutory duty.

The complaint directly blasts Falwell for negotiating a hefty new contract for himself in 2019 under false pretenses, and for withholding potentially damaging details from the university's board of trustees of his personal scandal that made headline news in 2020.

The scandal itself focused on allegations voiced by Giancarlo Granda, a pool attendant who later became involved in a relationship with the Falwells that started in 2012. In an [exclusive](#) tell-all with Reuters, Granda detailed that the sexual encounter took place "multiple times per year" at hotels in Miami, New York and even at the family's Virginia home.

However, the arrangement later came to an end after Granda wanted out, especially once a business disagreement emerged among the trio.

The scandal came to light in August 2020, when Falwell revealed to the [Washington Examiner](#) that his wife had an extramarital affair with Granda, and that Granda threatened to speak his truth if he was not given a hush payment of sorts. Additional details of the sexual arrangement were aired by Reuters.

At the time, Falwell was already on a leave of absence from his Liberty University post after images appeared on social media showing him alongside his wife's assistant, as the pair both had their [pants unzipped](#). In the wake of the Granda revelations, Falwell eventually resigned from his university post.

In the lawsuit, Liberty University officials note that Falwell's actions caused setbacks in the school's enrollment, fundraising and damaged the institution's reputation, among other troubles. "Despite his clear duties as an executive and officer at Liberty, Falwell Jr. chose personal protection," the suit reads.

Falwell is cited as improperly mixing his duties to the university with his personal life, full well knowing that "infidelity, immodesty, and acceptance of a loose lifestyle would stand in stark contrast to the conduct expected of leaders at Liberty."

Liberty is seeking compensatory damages of \$10 million, which can be tripled under Virginia law, plus punitive compensation. Additionally, the suit is requesting that Falwell return a variety of devices belonging to the school, including phones and computers.

accusing his administration of wrongfully denying financial aid to some of the evangelical school's online students.

In [remarks](#) to journalist Megan Stack, Falwell said that the lawsuit was "yet another attempt to defame me and discredit my record, following a series of harsh and unnecessary actions against my children, Becki, and me." The former university president also underscored that the suit was "full of lies and half truths."

The latest development came just one day after Falwell's son, Trey, [stepped down](#) as the Liberty University's vice president. Details of the departure have not been made available.

Falwell's father, Jerry Falwell Sr., founded the university in 1971 based on his principles as a Southern Baptist minister. The school, which maintains [strict morality rules](#), came under the leadership of Falwell Jr. after his father's 2007 death.

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Show Must Go On: Tokyo Olympics Chief Reiterates 2021 Games Will Not Be Canceled by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Tokyo Games were initially expected to be held over a 17-day period, starting in late July 2020. However, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the event was postponed, making this the first time in modern history the tournament has been postponed. Concerns have been repeatedly raised on whether the Summer Olympics will be held.

Seiko Hashimoto, the head of the Tokyo Olympics, confirmed on Friday that the historic sporting games will be held in three months' time, once again reassuring the public after a fellow Japanese official suggested otherwise.

Hashimoto [reaffirmed](#) the public during a news conference that the games would indeed be held, telling reporters that "there are a variety of concerns [surrounding the tournament] but as the Tokyo 2020 organizing committee we are not thinking about canceling the games."

At the time, the committee head was asked whether there were any conditions in which the Summer Olympics would be fully canceled, especially now as Japan has recently begun to record a surge in COVID-19 cases.

[Figures](#) released by Worldometer note that Japan has been registering thousands of new cases over the last week, with officials recording some 4,000 new cases on Thursday alone. The site indicates that Japan has a 3-day moving average of 3,294 new COVID-19 cases.

To date, the island nation has documented approximately 516,121 novel coronavirus cases as the associated death toll has reached roughly 9,500, a [Thursday release](#) issued by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has revealed.

Hasimoto's remarks came hours after Toshihiro Nikai, the general secretary of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, [told reporters](#) during a Thursday event that canceling the 2020 Games is "of course" still an option for organizers. Nikai had also stated that if the games caused a spike in COVID-19 cases, "there would be no meaning to having the Olympics."

Hashimoto addressed Nikai's remarks, explaining that the official's concerns were largely mirrored by the Japanese public. A [Sunday poll](#) conducted by Kyodo News found that about 80% of Japanese residents believe both the Summer Olympics and the Paralympics should be either canceled or rescheduled once again.

The start of the Olympic games is currently scheduled for July 23, with an estimated 11,000 athletes expected to participate. Another 4,400 athletes will be taking part in the Paralympics, which start on August 24.

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Pentagon Refuses to Comment on US Abandoning Black Sea Transit
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, reports surfaced that the US Department of Defense scrapped its plans to have two US Navy destroyers undertake a Black Sea transit over concerns regarding escalating tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

The US Department of Defense has refused to comment on whether it had intentionally abandoned plans to conduct a Black Sea transit, noting instead that it has carried out such operations before and would continue to do so.

John Kirby, a Pentagon spokesperson, sidestepped questions on the matter from reporters on Friday, informing members of the media that the US defense agency has been "conducting warship operations in the Black Sea on a routine basis, and this will continue."

Refusing to confirm or deny reports that the US scrapped the transit plan on purpose, Kirby remarked that "we don't talk about maritime operational movements in and out of specific choke points."

In [comments](#) to Sputnik earlier, the Defense Department refused to address the Black Sea transit, citing "security reasons." However, a representative from the Turkish Foreign Ministry later noted that the US had canceled the passage.

Kirby later acknowledged Russia's move to implement restrictions in parts of the Black Sea, using the opportunity to blast Moscow for its actions.

"This will be just the latest example of its ongoing campaign to undermine and destabilize Ukraine," Kirby said. "We call on Russia to cease its harassment of vessels in the region and reverse its buildup of forces along Ukraine's border and occupied Ukraine."

The official further reaffirmed the US' "unwavering" support for Ukraine's sovereignty over its territory, which encompass its "internationally recognized borders extending to its territorial waters."

Earlier, the Russian Defense Ministry's Department of Navigation and Oceanography announced that from April 24 to October 31 access would be restricted to three regions of the Black Sea for foreign military ships and other state vessels.

Following the announcement, NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu issued a [statement](#) highlighting the military alliance's concern and referring to the move as "unjustified." Lungescu further claimed that the development was "part of a broader pattern of destabilizing behavior by Russia."

The restrictions will affect the western portion of Crimea, the coastline from Sevastopol to Hurzuf, and an area off the Kerch peninsula along the Opuksky Nature Reserve, all areas located within the territorial waters of Russia.

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Facebook Bans Users From Sharing New York Post Article About Black Lives Matter
Co-Founder

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The co-founder of Black Lives Matter (BLM), Patrisse Cullors, recently came under fire for her real estate purchases in Los Angeles that amounted to over \$3 million. A Saturday article posted by the New York Post (NYP) detailed her recent million-dollar purchases and included a call for an investigation into the purchases from other BLM activists.

Facebook has prevented users globally from sharing the story about Cullors' home purchases, citing that it went against their community standards.

When a user attempts to post a link to the [NYP story](#) on Facebook the action can not be completed. A message from Facebook reads: "Your post couldn't be shared, because this link goes against our Community Standards. If you think this doesn't go against our Community Standards let us know."

A Facebook spokesperson has since reached out to a few news outlets, claiming that the NYP story was "removed for violating our privacy and personal information policy."

Details as to when the ban was enforced have not been immediately made available, but according to a report from The Hill, media newsletter Inquire has shared [multiple screenshots](#) from users in Europe who on Thursday night claimed they were also unable to share the story. Facebook is reported to have also blocked articles from the [Daily Mail Online](#) that are related to Cullors' spending habits.

Facebook has in the past banned users from sharing other articles from the NYP. In October 2020, Twitter and Facebook blocked users from posting a [NYP report](#) about emails found on a laptop that allegedly belonged to US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter. Before then, during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NYP also released an [opinion column](#) suggesting that the virus could have been released from a Chinese virology lab, which was also blocked by Facebook.

Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey has since retracted the social media's response to the ban on the Hunter Biden story, calling it "[wrong](#)" and vowing to instead provide "additional context" to such stories instead of forbidding users from sharing them.

Big Tech has repeatedly found itself [under fire](#) for its increased crackdown on posts that it considers being a spread of misinformation and disinformation. This recent development will surely add to the list of complaints about how much power the tech conglomerates are allowed. The Post has [responded](#) to the ban and defended their article, claiming that they were being silenced from reporting the news.

"The \$3.2 million real estate spending spree of BLM co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors is newsworthy for two reasons. One, she's an avowed Marxist, and as a public figure, it's legitimate to question whether she's practicing what she preaches," the editorial states, calling into question whether donations are being used to help pay for Cullors' high-end properties.

"Secondly, as the article details, the finances of Black Lives Matter are opaque, a mixture of for-profits and tax-free nonprofits, and they don't reveal how much its executives are paid. Are the people donating to BLM helping to pay for these properties?"

The article goes on to claim that the NYP reached out to Cullors for comment before publishing the article, but ultimately received no response.

Cullors Calls Articles Against Her 'Categorically Untrue' And 'Incredibly Dangerous'

In a recent interview with [BNC News](#) host Marc Lamont Hill, Cullors calls the recent articles about her spending "categorically untrue" and "incredibly dangerous."

In tears, Cullors noted that while the articles did not provide her home address, the pictures of her home could be used to pinpoint her location, ultimately causing an increase in security concerns for her and her family.

"The whole point of these articles and these attacks against me are to discredit me, but also to discredit the movement," she said.

Cullors also defended her spending habits, reiterating that she has never taken a salary from the BLM organization, and that allegations made against her are simply a way to discredit her and the BLM movement.

"I have never taken a salary from the Black Lives Matter Global National Fund," Cullors states in the interview, adding that all of her income comes from her various jobs as a professor, TV producer and writer, as well as various deals from YouTube and [more recently](#) from the Warner Bros. Television Group.

Even though Cullors continues to claim none of the money she has spent on her recent real estate purchases has come from the BLM organization, many critics still call into question the moral standing for Cullors, who is a self-proclaimed Marxist.

Marxists follow a set of beliefs that focus on the effects of capitalism on labor, productivity, and economic development, drawing attention to the struggle between social classes, particularly capitalists, and the working class.

In Cullors' interview with Hill, the BLM co-founder continues to emphasize that money given to BLM organization has indeed been given back to the Black community, and that she personally is giving back to the community by taking care of her family and loved ones. She did state that organizers should get paid for the work that they do.

When asked about other organizations, such as the NAACP, that have gained a substantial amount of money from recent events involving the police killings of various Black people, Cullors replied, "Our community members do need resources. Our community members do need support." However, she further argued that the organization, in particular, is "not a charity." "We are not a charity. We are a power building body," Cullors said, adding that there are other places people can target for grants like the US government.

Black Lives Matter Responds to Calls for Investigation Against Its Co-Founder

The BLM group issued a statement on Monday in response to the backlash, claiming Cullors hasn't received any money from the organization since 2019, and that the defamation of character is a ploy by white supremacists.

"Patrisse's work for Black people over the years has made her and others who align with the fight for Black liberation targets of racist violence," the [statement](#) read. "The narratives being spread about Patrisse have been generated by right-wing forces intent on reducing the support and influence of a movement that is larger than any one organization."

"This right-wing offensive not only puts Patrisse, her child and her loved ones in harm's way, it also continues a tradition of terror by white supremacists against Black activists. All Black activists know the fear these malicious and serious actions are meant to instill: the fear of being silenced, the trauma of being targeted, the torture of feeling one's family is exposed to danger just for speaking out against unjust systems. We have seen this tactic of terror time and again, but our movement will not be silenced," the statement concluded.

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National Institutes of Health Lifts Trump-Era Restrictions on Use of Fetal Tissue in Research by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Back in 2019, the Trump administration placed federal funding restrictions on the use of human fetal tissue for medical research projects. The move resulted in the establishment of a Human Fetal Tissue Research Ethics Advisory Board, which subsequently reviewed and rejected 13 out of 14 grant proposals involving fetus tissue.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) lifted the Trump-era restriction ban on fetal tissue research on Friday, removing the necessity of an ethics board and reopening access to federal funding for future research.

The shift came after Reps. Suzan DelBene (D-WA) and Mark Pocan (D-WI) introduced bill [H.R. 6417](#), which prohibits the secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) from withholding funds related to research that involves human fetal tissue.

Lawmakers argued that the use of fetal tissue had been legal for years, claiming that numerous fetal panels and reviews have concluded that the use of fetal tissue was critical for life-saving biomedical research.

In a US House [hearing](#) on Thursday, HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra hinted at the reversal decision, praising it and emphasizing that the change was needed to incorporate innovative treatments and therapies for the American people.

In October 2020, Becerra, who served as the attorney general of California, led a coalition of 22 attorneys general that sent a letter to the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the NIH, claiming that the lack of federal funding for fetal tissue research would put an “unnecessary and ill-advised” limit on the knowledge needed to fight SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Under the Trump White House, lawmakers moved to undo restrictions on fetal tissue research. At the time, Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) [expressed](#) that restrictions imposed on biomedical research using fetal tissue had a “chilling effect” on the ability of global experts to accurately respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Though [former] President [Donald] Trump claims almost every day that he is doing everything he can to find a treatment or cure to end the coronavirus pandemic, his restrictions on fetal tissue research are actively hindering the scientists who are trying to develop those therapeutics,” said Schakowsky.

“Research using fetal tissue plays an indispensable role in vital medical innovation that may result in a new age of vaccines for infectious diseases and treatment for debilitating diseases like ALS, Multiple Sclerosis, childhood leukemia, and now COVID-19,” she added.

Many anti-abortion groups are against the decision. A Twitter thread by The Charlotte Lozier Institute, a research and education institute of the Susan B. Anthony List, has called the move “barbaric” and claimed that the organs from fetuses were being used for humanized mice experiments, another issue that has called into question the [ethical](#) and moral standards of medical research.

Tom McClusky, president of March for Life Action, a pro-life policies organization, called the Friday development “very disappointing,” in a [statement](#) reported by The Hill.

“This type of experimental research is a gross violation of human dignity and is not where the majority of Americans want their tax dollars being spent,” McClusky said. “The government has no business creating a marketplace for aborted baby body parts.”

These developments come after the FDA [halted restrictions](#) earlier this week on the mailing of abortion pills during the pandemic, a move also met by applause and rejection from various lawmakers.

The [NIH notice](#) of the updated changes states that informed consent from donors is still an expectation, and that the research would follow any applicable federal, state, or local laws and regulations.

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RPT - US Sees Russian Sanctions on US as 'Escalatory,' Reserves Right to Retaliate - State Dept.

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"Today's announcement by the Russian government was escalatory and regrettable," the spokesperson said on Friday. "It is not in our interest to get into an escalatory cycle, but we reserve the right to respond to any Russian retaliation against the United States."

In response to the US sanctions against Russia, Moscow banned eight US citizens from entering the country, including US Attorney General Merrick Garland, US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines and FBI Director Christopher Wray.

On Thursday, Washington imposed sanctions on 32 Russian entities, including tech firms, and individuals for their alleged interference in the 2020 US presidential election and the purported hacking of US software supply chain networks. Under the sanctions, US financial institutions are prohibited from buying Russian government bonds during primary placements after June 14. However, they will still be able to buy and sell Russian government bonds on the secondary market.

The Russian Foreign Ministry condemned the new US sanctions as running contrary to the interests of the two nations.

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RPT - UN Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution on Monitors of Libya Ceasefire - Source

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) - The members of the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution that authorizes the departure of a team of monitors to observe the implementation of the ceasefire in Libya, a diplomatic source at the United Nations told Sputnik. "All members of the Security Council voted in favor of the resolution concerning the ceasefire monitoring component," the source said Friday.

The resolution, submitted by the United Kingdom, approves the proposals of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on the composition of the monitoring mission, according to the text of the draft seen by Sputnik.

On April 7, Guterres sent a letter to the UN Security Council, in which he proposed the monitoring team, which will operate within the UN Support Mission in Libya, to be set up of a maximum of 60 individuals.

Guterres said the monitors will be initially deployed in Sirte, and once conditions permit, a forward presence would be established in Tripoli.

The monitors will be unarmed and wearing garb to be identified as working for the United Nations.

In the resolution, the UN Security Council said it intends to review the progress of ceasefire monitors ahead of September 15, 2021. It also requests Guterres to consult whether any increase to the initial number of monitors would be necessary.

The document further strongly urges all UN member states to support the full implementation of the ceasefire agreement reached by the warring parties - the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) - on October 23, 2020, including through the withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya.

On December 31, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sent a letter to the Security Council in which he proposed establishing a ceasefire monitoring mechanism

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Raul Castro Retirement Unlikely to Alter Cuba's Domestic, External Policies

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The retirement of Cuban Communist Party First Secretary Raul Castro is unlikely to lead to any significant change in the country's domestic or foreign policies, analysts told Sputnik.

Castro announced his resignation during the Eighth Cuban Communist Party Congress in Havana earlier on Friday.

"The General of the Army said that he was pleased to hand over the leadership of the country to a group of trained leaders, seasoned by decades of experience ... committed to the ethics of the revolution, identified with the history and culture of the nation," Granma, the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, quoted Castro as saying.

Florida International University Cuban Research Institute Director Jorge Duany noted that Castro had laid out a clear path of succession to his designated replacement.

"On April 16-19, the Cuban Communist Party Congress is expected to formalize the retirement of Raul Castro as the First Secretary of the party and to pass that responsibility to current President Miguel Diaz-Canel. Whether this transition will produce significant political or economic reforms in Cuba is yet to be seen," he said.

Duany pointed out that Diaz-Canel has repeatedly pledged to continue Fidel and Raul Castro's revolutionary legacy. No major changes will likely take place in the existing power structure, except possibly for the appointment of younger members born after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 to the higher echelons of the party, he said.

"A pressing issue for the ruling elite is how to face the island's worst economic recession since the early 1990s (the Cuban economy officially decreased by about 11 percent last year), as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, the collapse of the island's tourist industry, [and] the declining economic assistance by the Maduro regime in Venezuela," Duany said.

Cuba was also still suffering from the lingering effects of the economic sanctions imposed by the Trump administration in the United States, Duany noted.

"A Cuba without Castros as maximum leaders of the revolution will probably remain a one-party state with a strong control over the economy, a monopoly over the mass media, and intolerance toward ideological diversity," he said.

Unfortunately, Cuba's immediate political and economic future appears bleak, Duany added.

CUBA UNLIKELY TO CHANGE COURSE

Cuban Research Institute Associate Director Sebastian Arcos agreed that change was unlikely following Raul Castro's departure.

"The leadership that will succeed him has been personally handpicked and groomed by him to continue the regime without any fundamental changes in nature. Other stalwart supporters of the status quo and the Castro family remain in key positions of power," Arcos said.

Raul Castro would undoubtedly continue to be extremely influential in any important state decisions after his retirement, Arcos also said.

"I foresee no fundamental changes in Cuba until after his passing," he added.

DIEHARD IDEOLOGUES

Mark Jones, Latin American Studies fellow at the Baker Institute of Rice University acknowledged that a new generation of leaders was taking over in Cuba, but he cautioned that they appeared to be diehard and unrelenting in their own political beliefs.

"This move by Raul Castro has been widely anticipated, with the goal being to complete the full transition of power to a new generation of diehard Communists like Miguel Diaz-Canel while Castro is still alive and able to fully give them his full revolutionary imprimatur as they assume complete control of Cuba," he said.

Castro's decision to retire while still clearly in control would help to avoid any potential uncertainty or chaos that might occur if he were to pass away before the transition was fully complete, Jones pointed out.

"Now Diaz-Canel and his comrades will be fully entrenched in control of Cuba with the full legitimacy of having been anointed to continue the Castro legacy ...If Raul Castro waited too long, the transition from his undisputed rule to that of the new generation could have been rocky and exploited by the regime's opponents within and outside of Cuba," he said.

However, Castro's successors now faced serious challenges in retaining control in a country whose economic problems are severe and where social grievances are on the rise, Jones added.

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Pompeo, Wife Made 100 Personal Requests of State Dept. Staff - Inspector General

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his wife Susan broke US ethics rules on more than 100 occasions by asking Department of State officials to undertake personal chores and activities for them, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) of the department said in a new report.

"OIG found that both Secretary and Mrs. Pompeo requested the political appointee and other employees of the Office of the Secretary undertake work of a personal nature, such as picking up personal items, planning events unrelated to the department's mission and conducting such personal business as pet care and mailing personal Christmas cards," the report said on Friday. OIG found that such requests were inconsistent with State Department ethics rules and those of the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch, the report said.

"However, with only a few exceptions, OIG did not find that Secretary and Mrs. Pompeo made personal requests to the special agents in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security who were protecting them. These agents generally told OIG that the Pompeos did not ask them to undertake tasks of a personal nature," the report added.

Since Pompeo no longer works for the government, the report did not make any recommendation for any action to be taken against him.

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Japan Prime Minister Suga Says Ready to Meet With North Korea's Leader

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said that he is ready to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un without preconditions to establish a fruitful relationship between the two countries and seek a solution to the issue of abductees.

"I am prepared myself to meet Chairman Kim Jong Un without preconditions towards the resolution of the abductions issue and towards establishment of the fruitful relationship with North Korea. I am determined to act by standing at the forefront myself," Suga said in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

Japan insists that North Korea abducted 17 of its citizens in the 1970s and 1980s to teach Japanese language and behavior at spy schools. In 2002, North Korea admitted its agents had abducted 13 Japanese citizens and denied involvement in any other disappearances.

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US Condemns Sentencing of Seven Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Activists - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States condemned the sentencing of seven pro-democracy activists who took part in a peaceful assembly of 1.7 million people in Hong Kong, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement.

"The United States condemns the sentencing of seven pro-democracy leaders on politically-motivated charges. Beijing and Hong Kong authorities are targeting Hong Kongers for doing nothing more than exercising protected rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of speech," Blinken said on Friday.

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Biden Discusses With Japan Prime Minister Challenges Posed By China, North Korea

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden met in-person with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and discussed the challenges posed by China and North Korea as well as climate change, the coronavirus pandemic and the countries' shared values.

"It's been my pleasure to welcome Prime Minister Suga to the White House," Biden said in during a press conference following the meeting on Friday. "This is our first in-person meeting here, the first head of state that I've asked in my administration to come to the White House." Biden thanked Suga for making the long trip to Washington and noted they have already met virtually during the G7 meeting and the Quad leaders summit.

"I greatly appreciate the chance to spend time with you in-person and to make our exchange of ideas face-to-face. There is no substitute for face-to-face discussions," Biden said. "Both Prime Minister Suga and I value the incredible partnership that exists not just between our governments, but between the Japanese people and the American people."

Suga echoed Biden's sentiments and emphasized that the US-Japan relationship is increasingly important given the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

Biden announced the resumption of the Mansfield Fellowship Program - named after the late US Senator and Ambassador to Japan Mike Mansfield - that is designed to forge people-to-people connections between Japan and the United States.

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US, Japan to Increase Cooperation on 5G, Semiconductor Supply Chains - Biden

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan will increase cooperation on 5G telecommunications, supply chains for semiconductors, quantum computing, and artificial

intelligence, President Joe Biden said in a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide.

"We're going to work together across a range of fields, from promoting secure and reliable 5G networks, to increasing our cooperation on supply chains for critical sectors like semiconductors, to driving joint research in areas like AI [artificial intelligence], genomics, quantum computing and much more," Biden said on Friday.

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US, Japan Committed to Meeting Zero Net Carbon Emissions By 2050 - Biden

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan are committed to meeting the zero net carbon emissions goal by 2050, but will first set and achieve other goals by 2030, President Joe Biden said during a press briefing.

"Japan and the United states are both committed to achieving net zero emission by 2050 and we know to do that will require setting and meeting our 2030 goals," Biden said after meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on Friday.

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RPT - US, Japan Both Recognize Importance of Taiwan Straits - Suga

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan both agree on the importance of Taiwan straits stability, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said in a press briefing.

"There is already an agreed recognition of the importance of peace and stability of the Taiwan straits between Japan and the United States which was reaffirmed on this occasion [during the meeting]," Suga said on Friday.

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US, Japan Agree to Jointly Confront Challenges Posed By China - Biden

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan are committed to working together to confront challenges emanating from China and North Korea opposing attempts to change the status quo in the Indo-Pacific region, but pursuing diplomatic options, the leaders of the two countries said after an in-person meeting.

"Today, Prime Minister Suga and I affirmed our iron-clad support for US-Japanese alliance and for our shared security. We committed to working together to take on the challenges from China and on issues like the East China Sea, the South China Sea as well as North Korea to ensure

the future of our free and open Indo-Pacific," US President Joe Biden said after a meeting with Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga
Biden described the meeting with Suga at the White House summit as "productive."

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NASA Planning for 'Regularly Recurring' Human Moon Missions - Senior Executive

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is now planning for "regularly recurring" ongoing manned missions to the Moon after its first Artemis Program landing scheduled for 2024, NASA Human Exploration and Operations Mission Directorate Associate Administrator Kathy Lueders said.

"This is part of an overall strategy for recurring missions to the lunar surface," Lueders told a podcast press conference on Friday. "We felt this was the best strategy at this point to award to one [company] and then to begin discussions with industry. ... This is obviously part of an overall larger strategy."

Lueders said the upcoming mission and the follow-up contract to SpaceX to develop manned spaceships for continued manned lunar missions over the coming decade would ultimately lead to human flights to Mars as well.

"This critical step puts humanity on a path to sustainable lunar exploration and keeps our eyes on missions farther into the solar system, including Mars," Lueders added.

The Human Landing System (HLS) spaceship will include a spacious cabin and two airlocks for astronaut moonwalks. It is also intended to evolve to a fully reusable launch and landing system designed for travel to the Moon, Mars, and other destinations, according to NASA.

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Ontario Extends Stay-At-Home Order By 2 Weeks, Introduces Checkpoints at Borders

TORONTO, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario is introducing a host of new coronavirus-related public health restriction, including extending the province-wide stay-at-home order by two weeks and setting up checkpoints at provincial borders, Premier Doug Ford announced.

The announcement follows new projections from an expert panel advising the provincial government revealed, according to which Ontario is on track to surpass earlier projections, even with increased public health measures in place, with the daily caseload expected to swell to more than 15,000 daily cases by the middle of June.

"Effective immediately, we are extending the emergency declaration and prolonging the stay-at-home order province-wide for an additional two weeks for a total of six weeks," Ford said during a press briefing on Friday.

The data modelling projections unveiled on April 1 revealed that Ontario was on track to see daily caseloads nearly tripling - to nearly 6,000 - by the end of the month if no action is taken. Ford implemented a four-week lockdown effective April 5 and declared a state of emergency coupled with a stay-at-home order just a week later.

The province will now be closing all "non-essential" construction, outdoor recreational facilities, including golf courses and introducing checkpoints between Ontario and the neighboring provinces of Manitoba and Quebec.

Earlier on Friday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau expressed concern about the situation in Ontario and offered to deploy the Red Cross to assist with in the rollout with mobile vaccination sites.

The premier's office, however, declined the offer with Ford's spokesperson Ivana Yelich saying that unless the offer is matched with an increase in supply, the help of the Red Cross is unnecessary.

Ontario is reporting some 4,500 people testing positive for the novel coronavirus daily and the province has reported 408,383 cases and over 7,664 virus-related deaths since the onset of the pandemic a year ago.

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SpaceX will now continue development of the first commercial human lander to carry the next two US astronauts to the lunar surface and at least one of them will be the first woman on the Moon. The Artemis program also plans to land the first person of color on the lunar surface, NASA said in a press release.

"Two crew members will transfer to the SpaceX human landing system (HLS) for the final leg of their journey to the surface of the Moon. After approximately a week exploring the surface, they will board the lander for their short trip back to orbit where they will return to Orion and their colleagues before heading back to Earth," NASA added.

The total value of the contract to SpaceX announced on Friday is \$2.89 billion, according to NASA.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- * Russia has banned eight US citizens from entering the country, including the US Attorney General, Homeland Security Secretary and the FBI Director, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday as part of response measures to the latest round of sanctions introduced by the United States.

- * Russia may order the US diplomatic missions to reduce the number of personnel in the country to 300 people, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

- * Russia will respond in kind to the US decision to expel 10 Russian diplomats and will ask ten US diplomats to leave the country, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

- * President Joe Biden views Russia as being isolated from the global community but sees the potential bilateral summit as an opportunity to return, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

- * Russia has positively assessed the US proposal for a summit between the country's presidents and will now be considering it according to the recent development in the bilateral relations, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * NATO is concerned about Russia's plans to restrict access to a number of areas of the Black Sea, calls for free access to Ukrainian ports on the Sea of Azov, as well as freedom of navigation, spokesperson Oana Lungescu said on Friday.

- * Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he was determined to talk with all leaders of the Normandy format, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, to resolve the conflict in the Donbas.

- * Zelenskyy said that possible discussions between Russia and the United States on Ukraine is a good initiative but without participation of Kiev they would be meaningless.

* Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal asked the United States to expand the training program for the country's armed forces by US instructors, at a Friday briefing with US Charge d'Affaires Kristina Kvien.

* The United States may consider undertaking an expansion of its military presence in Ukraine if the need arises, Kvien said.

* The United States sees Russia's decision to close parts of the Black Sea for foreign navies as part of its ongoing campaign against Ukraine and calls for it be stopped, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said.

CUBA'S RAUL CASTRO RESIGNS

* Raul Castro, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, announced his resignation in a statement during the VIII party congress in Havana.

SERBIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Serbia believes there is potential to further deepen cooperation with Russia in energy and agriculture, which could include new gas pipelines and hydroenergy plants reconstruction, Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selakovic, who is currently on a visit to Moscow, said in an interview with Sputnik.

* Serbia is interested in increasing the volume of Russian gas import, and will certainly discuss this with the partners, Selakovic said.

INDIANAPOLIS SHOOTING INCIDENT

* The shooter who killed eight people at a delivery facility in Indianapolis, Indiana, remains unidentified and his motives unclear, local deputy police chief Craig McCartt told reporters on Friday.

* All US flags will be flown at half-staff until April 20 out of respect for the victims of Thursday's shooting in Indianapolis, Indiana, the White House said in a statement.

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NASA Planning For 'Regularly Recurring' Human Moon Missions - Senior Executive

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is now planning for "regularly recurring" ongoing manned missions to the Moon after its first Artemis Program landing scheduled for 2024, NASA Human Exploration and Operations Mission Directorate Associate Administrator Kathy Lueders said on Friday.

"This is part of an overall strategy for recurring missions to the lunar surface," Lueders told a podcast press conference. "We felt this was the best strategy at this point to award to one [company] and then to begin discussions with industry. ... This is obviously part of an overall larger strategy."

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Biden to Set Final, Increased Refugee Cap for Remainder of Fiscal Year by May 15 - Psaki

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will increase the US refugee admissions cap for the remainder of this year by May 15, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We expect the President to set a final, increased refugee cap for the remainder of this fiscal year by May 15," Psaki said in a press release.

Earlier in the day, the White House revealed that the Biden administration would keep the US refugee admissions limit at 15,000 this year as was previously set by the Trump administration.

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Dow Extends Record High, Closes Up 3rd Straight Week on US Economic Strength

NEW YORK, April 16 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's broadest stocks indicator, the Dow Jones Industrial Average, extended record highs above 34,000 points on Friday as it closed up for a fourth straight week on the strength of US economic data suggesting a faster-than-expected rebound from the coronavirus pandemic.

The Dow, Wall Street's broadest stock indicator comprising mostly industrial stocks, closed up 41 points, or 1.2 percent, at 34,200, after hitting an all-time high at 34,257. For the year, it is up 11.7 percent.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, settled up 46 points, or 1.4 percent, at 4,169, after a record high at 4,185. Like the Dow, the S&P also rose for a fourth week in a row, gaining 11.4 percent on the year.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index finished up 62 points, or 1.1 percent, at 14,052. Nasdaq, which groups high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed for a third straight week, rising 9 percent on the year.

Stocks rallied after a rash of US economic data this week exceeded forecasts, fueling hopes for faster-than-expected economic recovery.

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SpaceX Wins Contract to Build Human Mission Lander For US Return to Moon - NASA

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has chosen Elon Musk's company SpaceX to build the Human Landing System (HLS) for the

first US manned mission to the Moon in half a century, HLS contracting officer Lisa Watson-Morgan told a podcast press conference on Friday.

"I am very excited that we have awarded SpaceX [the contract] to continue development of the Human Landing System: It is a single-stage landing system ...[The] contract is for a single crew landing demonstration mission," Watson-Morgan said.

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Pentagon Spokesman Refuses to Apologize for Afghan Bounties Allegations Against Russia

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Friday that there will not be any apologies for the debunked US allegations that Russia offered monetary awards to militants in Afghanistan for killing US soldiers deployed in the region.

The intelligence review of all Russia-related grievances commissioned by President Joe Biden found "low to moderate" confidence in the allegations that had been rejected by Moscow and dismissed by officials in the Trump administration.

"We are talking about safety and well-being of our troops in harms way. And we won't make any apologies for wanting to be concerned about that," Kirby said during a briefing.

Afghan bounties allegations were actively promoted by the Biden campaign ahead of the 2020 presidential election as an example of what was described as former President Donald Trump's inability to stand up to Russia.

"I have not accused anyone here and I don't think we have accused anyone. We have said that it's a serious potential charge here... We are concerned enough about this that we want Moscow to be transparent about it," Kirby said.

The Defense Department spokesperson refused to provide any details and lashed out at a reporter who reproached him of "still trying to give this credence after it has been basically shown to be pretty thin stuff."

There is enough uncertainty about it that we believe... we need to know more. And I am a little bit perplexed as to why the very idea of this... why you wouldn't want us to want to take it seriously, to know more about it," he said.

On Thursday, the White House referred to the bounties allegations as "reports," but did not use them as a pretext for imposing additional sanctions against Russia and said the issue continues to be handled through "diplomatic, military and intelligence channels."

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Bolton Says He's 'Proud' to Be Barred From Entering Russia

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – Former US National Security Adviser John Bolton on Friday said he was “proud” to be barred from entering Russia after Moscow’s decision to include him on a list of individuals who will be denied entry to the country.

“I have been named on a list of individuals barred from Russia in retaliation for sanctions,” Bolton said via Twitter. “Russia deserves the strongest possible condemnation for their attempts to undermine our way of life. I am proud to be recognized as a voice for American interests.” Russia banned eight current and former US officials, including Bolton, from entering the country in response to new US sanctions and expulsions of Russian diplomats, the Foreign Ministry said earlier on Friday.

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Biden to Keep US Refugee Admissions at Record-Low 15,000 as Set By Trump - White House

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will keep the US refugee admissions cap at 15,000 this year as set by former President Donald Trump, the White House revealed on Friday.

"The admission of up to 15,000 refugees remains justified by humanitarian concerns and is otherwise in the national interest," the White House said in a memorandum to the US Secretary of State.

The memorandum said that if the United States reaches 15,000 admissions before the end of the fiscal year in September, the US administration could possibly increase the cap of admissions.

The memorandum notes that 7,000 refugees would be allowed from Africa; 1,000 from East Asia; 1,500 from Europe and Central Asia; 3,000 from Latin America and the Caribbean; 1,500 from the Near East and South Asia; and 1,000 other spots will be reserved.

Earlier on Friday, the New York Times, citing a senior US administration official, said that the Biden administration made the decision to keep the US refugee limit at 15,000 after dealing with the influx of illegal border crossings on the United States' border with Mexico.

The surge of unaccompanied migrant children on the US southern border has already overwhelmed the country's refugee agency, the report said.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken had previously notified Congress that the US administration would aim to allow 62,500 refugees this year.

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RECAST - US House to Vote on Bill to Make DC a State Next Thursday - Majority Leader Hoyer

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will vote next Thursday on legislation to make Washington, DC, the federal capital a new state of the Union, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer announced on Friday.

"I expect to bring HR51 [House Resolution 51] to the House Floor for a vote on Thursday, April 22 to grant DC [Washington, District of Columbia] Statehood to the more than 700,000 residents of the District of Columbia," Hoyer said in a Twitter message.

Democrats have repeatedly tried to introduce such measures in Congress over the years but have previously failed to get them advanced into law. The measure would give Washington, DC, a governor and state legislature and would also give it its own two members of the US Senate.

"The voice of every American citizen deserves to be heard – it's past time that we make statehood a reality for DC," Hoyer tweeted.

Washington, DC overwhelmingly votes Democratic in all its mayoral, city council and House of Representatives elections. Adding two reliable Democratic senators would give the party a permanent edge in the currently evenly-divided Senate.

The US House Oversight Committee on Wednesday approved the bill, sending it on for a full House vote.

The measure faces long-odds for approval in the Senate due to Republican opposition. Apart from constitutional arguments, Republicans say the overwhelmingly Democrat city would shift the political balance in Congress.

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Pfizer, Moderna Declined J&J Request to Study Vaccine Blood Clot Risks - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Pfizer and Moderna declined to participate in Johnson & Johnson's multilateral collaborative study of the recent blood clots side-effects after vaccination against COVID-19, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday citing people familiar with the matter.

Johnson & Johnson asked AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Moderna to study the possible safety issues of COVID-19 vaccines but only AstraZeneca, which has been experiencing similar blood-clotting effects in Europe, agreed, the report said.

Pfizer and Moderna decided not be a part of the joint effort because they did not want their respective vaccines to be associated with either Johnson & Johnson or AstraZeneca which had been buffeted with adverse side-effects, while no such effects have been reported by people who received the Pfizer and Moderna shots.

The administration of Johnson & Johnson vaccine was paused earlier this week after 6 confirmed cases of blood clots in combination found in women between the ages of 18 and 48 with one woman died and one being in critical condition. Overall, more than seven million people in the US received a single-dose of Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

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Pentagon Does Not Rule Out Possibility of Deploying More Capabilities for Afghan Pullout

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department does not rule out the possibility of deploying additional capabilities to Afghanistan for the US drawdown, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"It is not out of the realm of the possible that for a short period of time there will have to be some additional enabling capabilities added to Afghanistan to, again, help affect a safe, orderly, and deliberately planned drawdown of everybody by the president's deadline in early September," Kirby said in a press briefing.

Kirby said preliminary drawdown plans are currently being revised, which include the pullout of some US contractors from Afghanistan.

President Joe Biden announced this week that the 2,500 American troops in Afghanistan would be pulled out by September 11, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. The drawdown is expected to begin by May 1.

On Wednesday, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that the alliance would start the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan on May 1 and wrap it up within several months.

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Moderna Cutting Vaccine Deliveries to Canada by Nearly Half - Minister

TORONTO, April 16 (Sputnik) - US drugmaker Moderna is cutting its coronavirus vaccine delivery targets to Canada by half amid production issues, the country's Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said on Friday.

"As Moderna indicated this morning, it faces ongoing challenges with ramping up production to meet intense global demand due to labor shortages and other issues. As a result, our next shipment will be smaller than expected and we may see additional delays for the coming months," Anand told reporters.

Moderna was set to deliver 1,202,400 vaccines to Canada during the week of April 19, however, Anand said in a statement that the company will ship only half of that number, approximately 650,000.

Instead, the shortfall will be offset by additional Pfizer vaccine doses, according to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who announced that the federal government has inked a deal with the company for an additional 8 million doses in the next few months.

Pfizer will deliver an additional 4 million in May and 2 million in the months of June and July, bringing the company's total commitment to Canada between April and June to 24 million doses, Anand said.

The procurement minister added that Johnson & Johnson will begin vaccine shipments to Canada later this month, with the first 300,000 doses expected arrive the week of April 27. Despite inking deals with numerous vaccine manufacturers, the Trudeau government has faced sharp criticism for a muted vaccine rollout program that has been labeled a failure by opposition parties and many Canadians, according to the latest polling numbers.

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Man Arrested With Rifle, Ammo, Gas Mask at New York's Times Square Metro Station - Reports
WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - An Ohio man carrying a semi-automatic rifle, ammunition, and a gas mask was arrested in the Times Square Station of the New York City subway system on Friday, NBC reported.

While performing an inspection of the station, NYPD officers noticed the man when he took the weapon out of a bag and placed it on the ground, the report said citing officials. The man was then taken into custody by the officers.

Investigators are working to determine why the man was carrying the items.

The man reportedly claims that it was legal for him to have the weapon. The rifle was unloaded when officers arrested him, but he did have a loaded clip with him.

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Canada's Ontario Could See Over 30,000 Daily Cases by Early June – Modeling Data

TORONTO, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario could see a near seven-fold rise in daily COVID-19 case counts by June if the province implements "weak" public health measures and continues with a subdued vaccine rollout, new data from an expert panel advising the provincial government revealed on Friday.

"The models are suggesting that we would've had a much, much higher rate of case growth – to an almost unbelievable level of, perhaps, 30,000 before it would peak," Dr. Adalsteinn Brown, the Ontario government's science advisory co-chair, said, noting that this scenario is less probable following steps taking by Premier Doug Ford in the weeks since the last modelling projections were unveiled.

The data modelling projections unveiled on April 1 revealed that Ontario was on track to see daily caseloads nearly tripling - to nearly 6,000 - by the end of the month if no action is taken. Ford implemented a four-week lockdown effective April 5 and declared a state of emergency coupled with a stay-at-home order just a week later.

However, the expert panel anticipates the case counts will surpass their earlier projections, even with increased public health measures in place, swelling to over 15,000 daily cases by the middle of June.

Brown also warned that all projections point to growing ICU occupancy, which is already at record levels. The modelling suggests that with the current measures in place the province could see 2,000 individuals in intensive care by the middle of next month and stricter restrictions would be needed to cap growth at 1,000 cases. There are currently 701 individuals under intensive care with COVID-19 related illnesses.

The panel noted that the growth could be tempered by prolonged employment of the public health orders or introducing even stricter measures. Growing speculation around Queens Park suggests that the Ford government is considering additional measures including a province-wide curfew, travel restrictions and shuttering some construction activity.

The modelling also suggests that spread could be curbed by tripling number of daily vaccinations from 100,000 to 300,000 daily administered shots.

Earlier in the day, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau speaking to reporters in Ottawa expressed his concern about the situation in Ontario, in particular the hotspot of Toronto, and offered to deploy the Red Cross that would assist with in the rollout with mobile vaccination sites.

The premier's office, however, declined the offer with Ford's spokesperson Ivana Yelich saying in a statement that unless the offer is matched with an increase in supply, the help of the Red Cross is unnecessary.

"We do not have a capacity issue, we have a supply issue," Yelich said.

The province's chief medical officer, Dr. David Williams, during a press briefing said that Ontario has the capacity to administer over 500,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses daily contingent on adequate supply.

Federal and provincial officials have been at odds for weeks over the pace of vaccine deliveries from Ottawa's to Toronto.

Canada is currently in the third wave of the coronavirus pandemic, with Trudeau saying on Friday that the situation is "very serious" and urging Canadians to make one last push in the "final but toughest stretch" of the pandemic.

The resurgence of the pandemic has been most pronounced in the province of Ontario, where the spread has been exacerbated by variants of concerning, particularly the B.1.1.7 variant that was first identified in the United Kingdom.

Ontario is reporting some 4,500 people testing positive for the novel coronavirus daily and the province has recorded 408,383 cases and over 7,664 virus-related deaths since the onset of the pandemic a year ago.

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US Navy to Continue Routine Operations in Black Sea - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US will continue to routinely operate in the Black Sea though it currently does not have its warships there, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Friday.

He refused to confirm or deny reports that the Pentagon has recently canceled the deployment of two destroyers on the Black Sea not to exacerbate tensions with Russia. He added that currently there are no US naval assets in the Black Sea.

"We don't talk about maritime operational movements in and out of specific choke points. We have routinely operated - naval warships - in the Black Sea and that will continue," Kirby said during a briefing.

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US Sees Russia Plan to Restrict Access to Black Sea as Bid to Undermine Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States sees Russia's decision to close parts of the Black Sea for foreign navies as part of its ongoing campaign against Ukraine and calls for it be stopped, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Friday.

"This will be just the latest example of its ongoing campaign to undermine and destabilize Ukraine. We call on Russia to cease its harassment of vessels in the region and reverse its buildup of forces along Ukraine's border and occupied Ukraine," Kirby said during a briefing. He added that the US is aware that Russia announced its intention to block foreign naval ship and state vessels in Kerch Strait, the Sea of Azov and parts of the Black Sea through October citing military exercises. Kirby reaffirmed US "unwavering" support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its "internationally recognized borders extending to its territorial waters."

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Pentagon Does Not Rule Out Possibility of Deploying More Capabilities for Afghan Pullout

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department does not rule out the possibility of deploying additional capabilities to Afghanistan for the US drawdown, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"It is not out of the realm of the possible that for a short period of time there will have to be some additional enabling capabilities added to Afghanistan to, again, help affect a safe, orderly, and deliberately planned drawdown of everybody by the president's deadline in early September," Kirby said in a press briefing.

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Lawyers for Huawei's Meng to Seek to Adjourn Extradition Hearing on Monday - Court

TORONTO, April 16 (Sputnik) - Lawyers for Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou will present an application to a British Columbia Supreme Court justice on Monday seeking to adjourn the extradition hearing set to resume on April 26, a court spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday.

"Please be advised that defense counsel in United States v. Meng will be bringing an application before the Associate Chief Justice [Heather Holmes] on Monday April 19th at 10:00 a.m. [5:00 p.m. GMT] to adjourn the proceeding scheduled to resume on April 26th," the spokesperson said in an email.

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UN Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution on Monitors of Libya Ceasefire - Source

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) - The members of the UN Security Council on Friday unanimously adopted a resolution that authorizes the departure of a team of monitors to observe the implementation of the ceasefire in Libya, a diplomatic source at the United Nations told Sputnik on Friday.

"All members of the Security Council voted in favor of the resolution concerning the ceasefire monitoring component," the source said.

The resolution, submitted by the United Kingdom, approves the proposals of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on the composition of the monitoring mission, according to the text of the draft seen by Sputnik.

On April 7, Guterres sent a letter to the UN Security Council, in which he proposed the monitoring team, which will operate within the UN Support Mission in Libya, to be set up of a maximum of 60 individuals.

Guterres said the monitors will be initially deployed in Sirte, and once conditions permit, a forward presence would be established in Tripoli.

The monitors will be unarmed and wearing garb to be identified as working for the United Nations.

In the resolution, the UN Security Council said it intends to review the progress of ceasefire monitors ahead of September 15, 2021. It also requests Guterres to consult whether any increase to the initial number of monitors would be necessary.

The document further strongly urges all UN member states to support the full implementation of the ceasefire agreement reached by the warring parties - the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) - on October 23, 2020, including through the withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya.

On December 31, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sent a letter to the Security Council in which he proposed establishing a ceasefire monitoring mechanism.

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Over 31Mln People in West, Central Africa Expected to Experience Hunger By Autumn - UN

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - More than 31 million people are expected to experience hunger in West and Central Africa later this summer as a result of ongoing conflicts and the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, the World Food Program (WFP) said on Friday.

"In West Africa, conflict is already driving hunger and misery. The relentless rise in prices acts as a misery multiplier, driving millions deeper into hunger and desperation. Even when food is available, families simply cannot afford it - and soaring prices are pushing a basic meal beyond the reach of millions of poor families who were already struggling to get by," WFP Regional Director for Southern Africa Chris Nikoi said.

The WFP explained that the decrease in trade caused by the coronavirus pandemic and related restrictive measures have caused a 40 percent to 200 percent increase in the price of food staples in the region. In addition, escalating conflicts are displacing large segments of the population as people leave their homes and fields to flee the violence.

Food insecurity in the area is expected to reach the 31 million person mark in July and August - a time of the year between harvest seasons during which food supplies are lowest - as the cost and availability of foods continues to increase.

The WFP noted that it assisted with food some 17 million people in West Africa in 2020, adding that it estimates it will exceed that number by more than a million people this year if it receives the necessary \$770 million in funding.

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UN Chief 'Distressed' by Yet Another Police Shooting of Black Man in US - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was distressed to learn about another killing of unarmed Black man Daunte Wright by a police officer in the US state of Minnesota, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

Wright was shot dead during a traffic stop on Sunday by the police officer, who claims to have accidentally drawn and discharged a handgun instead of a taser.

"[The Secretary-General] is, obviously, following the news and, I think, like everyone, we've been very much distressed by yet other examples of young Black man being killed by the police," Dujarric said.

Guterres stressed that all cases of such police violence across the globe must be investigated, while police forces need to receive adequate human rights training to do their job properly, the spokesman said.

Dujarric also pointed out that those who are demonstrating and expressing their anger over Wright's killing need to be allowed to do so peacefully.

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Biden to Keep US Refugee Admissions at Record-Low 15,000 as Set by Trump - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will keep the US refugee admissions cap at 15,000 this year as set by former President Donald Trump, the New York Times reported on Friday citing a senior US administration official.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had previously notified Congress that the US administration would aim to allow 62,500 refugees this year.

The report said the Biden administration made the decision to keep the US refugee limit at 15,000 after dealing with the influx illegal border crossings on the United States' border with Mexico.

The surge of unaccompanied minors on the US southern border has already overwhelmed the country's refugee agency, the report said.

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Biden Orders Flags to Be Flown at Half-Staff in Honor of Indianapolis Shooting Victims

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - All US flags will be flown at half-staff until April 20 out of respect for the victims of Thursday's shooting in Indianapolis, Indiana, the White House said in a statement.

"As a mark of respect for the victims of the senseless acts of violence perpetrated on April 15, 2021, in Indianapolis, Indiana... I hereby order that the flag of the United States shall be flown at half-staff at the White House and upon all public buildings and grounds, at all military posts and naval stations, and on all naval vessels of the Federal Government in the District of Columbia and throughout the United States and its territories and possessions until sunset, April 20, 2021," the statement said on Friday.

The White House explained that the order also applies to embassies, military bases and other US facilities around the world.

On Thursday night, several shootings occurred in Indianapolis and the one at the FedEx facility left eight people dead. The gunman reportedly took his own life before he could be apprehended by police, according to the authorities.

The order comes at a time when similar shootings around the United States have reignited the debate on gun control after Biden announced earlier this month that he would implement a package of executive orders to combat gun violence.

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US, 4 Coalition Allies Condemn Attacks on Bases in Kurdistan - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and the governments of the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy have condemned Wednesday's missile attacks on US and

coalition installations in Iraqi Kurdistan and warned they would not be tolerated, a joint statement released by the Department of State said on Friday.

"We, the governments of France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America condemn in the strongest terms the April 14 attacks in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region," the statement said.

The five governments will back Iraq's investigation into the attacks and they remain committed to the struggle against the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), the statement added.

"Together, our governments will support the government of Iraq's investigation into the attacks to ensure that those responsible will be held accountable. We are united in our view that attacks on US and Coalition personnel and facilities will not be tolerated and reiterate our steadfast commitment to the fight against ISIS [Islamic State]," it said.

On late Wednesday, a source in the Iraqi security agencies told Sputnik that the military camp of the Turkish Armed Forces in northern Iraq and the airport in Erbil had been subject to missile attacks.

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White House Promises 'More News' Later on Friday on Raising US Refugee Cap

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters to expect "more news" later on Friday on the US refugees cap that President Joe Biden has vowed to raise.

"I actually expect we will have some more news on this today. So stay tuned," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

Biden promised to reinstate the refugee admissions in the United States back at 125,000 for "the first full fiscal year" of his administration. Last October, his predecessor Donald Trump lowered the cap to 15,000.

Psaki said that it took the Biden administration some time to evaluate "how trashed in some ways the refugee processing system had become" and to rebuild "some of those muscles."

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US Govt. Investing \$4Bln to Fight COVID-19 Impact on Native Americans - White House

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is going to invest \$4 billion in funds approved for the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan (ARP) to boost health services for Native American peoples, the White House announced in a press release on Friday.

"As part of President Biden's continued efforts to ensure the pandemic response reaches all people and all communities, the Biden administration is announcing it will invest more than \$4 billion to combat COVID-19 in Indian Country," the release said.

The funding, from the American Rescue Plan, will expand coronavirus vaccinations, testing and treatment, increase preventive health services to American Indians and Alaska Natives at higher risk for the disease and expand hospitals' and health clinics' ability to serve their communities during the pandemic and beyond, the release said.

The package will include \$600 million to increase coronavirus vaccinations in Native American regions, \$1 billion to detect and diagnose infections and boost supplies of Personal Protective Equipment, the release also said.

The plan will also funnel \$2 billion to Native American tribal health systems due to lost reimbursements for care during the pandemic, \$84 million to aid urban Indian organizations, \$140 million for health IT and telehealth services and \$500 million to support overall health care services, the release added.

American Indians and Alaska Natives are 3.5 times more likely to get COVID-19 than the non-Hispanic white population of the United States and they have had the highest hospitalization rate of any racial or ethnic group, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Biden Views Russia as Being Outside Global Community, Summit as 'Bridge Back'- White House

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden views Russia as being isolated from the global community but sees the potential bilateral summit as an opportunity to return, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"I think the president's view is that Russia is on the outside of the global community in many respects at this point in time, it's the G7 not the G8," Psaki said in a press briefing. "What the president is offering is a bridge back, so certainly he believes it's in their interest to take him up on that offer."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said earlier that Russia does not set any preconditions for the potential meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart. Peskov added that Putin will need some time to analyze Biden's proposal on the bilateral meeting.

On Thursday, the Biden administration announced it would expel ten Russian diplomats and impose sanctions on dozens of Russian nationals and companies. The US government also moved to raise Russia's borrowing costs by barring US entities from buying bonds directly from Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said a response to those measures was "inevitable."

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Pause on Johnson & Johnson Vaccine Will Last at Least 1 More Week - US Health Agency

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The pause on the administration of Johnson & Johnson vaccine will last at least one more week as the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) will meet not earlier than next Friday to discuss the issue of the vaccine side-effects, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) chief Rochelle Walensky said during a press briefing.

"[On Wednesday] the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) met to discuss the 6 cases [of blood clots after Johnson & Johnson vaccine] and provide recommendations," Walensky said on Friday. "The recommendation from this group of independent experts for a continued pause will allow additional time to review any additional cases that might come in and to them to conduct a complete risk assessment and to evaluate the emergent science. ACIP will meet again this Friday, April 23 from 11 to 5 to provide further recommendations."

Walensky also said CDC has reached to about 10,000 health providers to educate them on what to look for in terms of possible side-effects after the administration of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Earlier in April, CDC and the Food and Drug Administration issued a joint statement recommending a pause in the use of Johnson & Johnson vaccine after 6 confirmed cases of blood clots in combination with low levels of blood platelets found in women between the ages of 18 and 48. The symptoms occurred between 6-13 days after vaccination.

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Biden Views Russia as Being Outside Global Community, Summit as 'Bridge Back'- White House

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden views Russia as being isolated from the global community but sees the potential bilateral summit as an opportunity to return, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"I think the president's view is that Russia is on the outside of the global community in many respects at this point in time, it's the G7 not the G8," Psaki said in a press briefing. "What the president is offering is a bridge back, so certainly he believes it's in their interest to take him up on that offer."

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Coronavirus Variants Account for Almost 50% of All New Cases in US - White House

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus variants represent almost half of all new cases in the United States, White House Senior Adviser on the COVID-19 response Andy Slavitt said during a briefing on Friday.

"Right now these variants account for nearly half of all COVID-19 cases in the United States," Slavitt said.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) chief Rochelle Walensky said during the briefing that B.1.1.7 or the British variant of the novel coronavirus represents 44 percent of the cases during the week of March 27 and the CDC expects the prevalence of this variant to be higher by now.

Earlier on Friday, the Biden administration announced the US government will invest \$1.7 billion into doing more genomic sequencing to better monitor and prevent the coronavirus variants from emerging.

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US March Homebuilding Up 19% on Month, 37% on Year - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US homebuilding grew 19 percent more in March than in February and 37 percent higher from a year ago, the US Census Bureau, a unit within the Commerce Department, said on Friday.

"Privately-owned housing starts in March were at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1,739,000," the US Census Bureau said in a statement. "This is 19.4 percent above the revised February estimate of 1,457,000 and is 37.0 percent above the March 2020 rate."

Some economists polled by US media forecast a growth of 13.5 percent for homebuilding last month, after a 10.3 percent expansion in February.

"[Home] sales were depressed in February by cold weather, so a big rebound was expected," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive. "But [this] was even stronger than anticipated as the housing market continues to heat up."

A rash of US economic data this week have exceeded forecasts, fueling hopes for faster-than-expected recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

On Thursday, the Commerce Department said US retail sales jumped 9.8 percent in March, above the forecast growth of 5.8 percent, as consumers spent stimulus checks sent out last month by the Biden administration as relief for the pandemic.

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Shooter at Indianapolis FedEx Facility Not Identified Yet, Motive Unclear - Police

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The shooter who killed eight people at a delivery facility in Indianapolis, Indiana, remains unidentified and his motives unclear, local deputy police chief Craig Mccartt told reporters on Friday.

"There is not really much that we can say about him until we have made positive identification," Mccartt said during a press conference.

On Thursday night, the suspect killed eight and wounded five people at a facility of the FedEx delivery services company and committed suicide shortly before police arrived.

"When he came there, he got out of his car and pretty quickly started some random shooting outside the facility. There was no confrontation with anyone who was there, there was no disturbance, there was no argument. He just appeared to randomly start shooting," Mccartt said. The shooting started at the parking lot and continued inside the building "for a brief period of time before he took his own life," Mccartt added.

FBI special agent in charge Paul Keenan told reporters that it would be premature to speculate about shooter's motivation.

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Democrats Introducing Bill Next Week to Make Washington, DC 51st US State - House Leader

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Democrats will introduce a new bill next Thursday to make Washington, DC, the federal capital, a new state of the union, US House of Representatives Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said on Friday.

"I expect to bring HR51 [House Resolution 51] to the House Floor for a vote on Thursday, April 22 to grant DC [Washington, District of Columbia] Statehood to the more than 700,000 residents of the District of Columbia," Hoyer said via Twitter.

Democrats have repeatedly tried to introduce such measures in Congress over the years but have previously failed to get them advanced into law. The measure would give Washington, DC, a governor and state legislature and would also give it its own two members of the US Senate.

"The voice of every American citizen deserves to be heard - it's past time that we make statehood a reality for [Washington,] DC," Hoyer said.

Washington, DC overwhelmingly votes Democratic in all its mayoral, city council and House of Representatives elections. Adding two reliable Democratic senators would give the party a permanent edge in the currently evenly-divided Senate.

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US to Create Aircraft Infrastructure in Norway to Monitor Russian Submarines - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US Navy will build the necessary infrastructure in Norway to allow its patrol aircraft to monitor Russian submarines off the coast of Norway, the Barents Observer reported on Friday citing Norway's defense minister Frank Bakke-Jensen. Earlier in the day, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Norwegian counterpart Frank Bakke-Jensen signed the Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement (SDCA) to construct hangar and fuel supply infrastructure for US Navy P-8A maritime patrol aircraft at the Evenes airport and the nearby Ramsund naval station, the report said.

Bakke-Jensen said the goal in reaching the agreement was to increase the surveillance capabilities of increased Russian submarine activities but not to escalate tensions with Russia. New infrastructure will be built at the airports at Rygge, Sola and Evenes as well as the Ramsund naval station and the first five P-8A Poseidon patrol aircraft will be delivered in 2022, the report said.

The agreement underscores that no nuclear weapons are allowed on the ships or aircraft arriving to Norway.

Earlier in April, the United States announced that it is closely monitoring Russia's military activities in the Arctic and is committed to protecting its interests in the region.

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US, Norway Ink Deal to Expand Defense Cooperation - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – The United States and Norway have signed a deal to deepen their defense cooperation and strengthen NATO operations, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"Today in Oslo, the United States of America and the Kingdom of Norway concluded the Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement (SDCA), which will allow our countries to deepen bilateral security cooperation, strengthen NATO operations, and increase Transatlantic security," Blinken said in a statement.

The agreement reflects the commitment of both countries to reinvigorating trans-Atlantic alliances to "meet common security challenges and protect shared interests," Blinken said.

The deal underscores a long-time bilateral partnership in security, he added.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby in a separate news release noted that the agreement would advance transatlantic security for "decades to come."

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US to Invest \$1.7Bln to Fight COVID-19 Variants - White House

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is investing \$1.7 billion to monitor, track and defeat emerging variants of the coronavirus that are threatening pockets of the country, the White House announced on Friday.

"In order to improve the detection, monitoring, and mitigation of these COVID-19 variants, the Biden Administration is rapidly investing \$1.7 billion from the American Rescue Plan to help states and other jurisdictions more effectively fight these mutations," a White House statement said.

The American Rescue Plan is a \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief bill approved by Congress in March. The White House statement noted that the original strain of the COVID-19 comprised only about half of all the nearly 31.5 million infections in America while "new and potentially dangerous strains" make up the other half.

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US Delivers Emergency Shelter for 80,000 Ethiopians Displaced by Tigray Conflict - IOM

UNITED NATIONS, April 16 (Sputnik) - The United States provided supplies that will be used to build a temporary shelter for more than 80,000 people who had been forced to flee their homes after the conflict broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said on Friday.

"IOM today received over 1,500 rolls of heavy-duty plastic sheeting from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) that will be used to provide temporary shelter relief to more than 80,000 people displaced by conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia," IOM said in a press release.

The donated supplies include sleeping mats, blankets, kitchen sets and cooking utensils. The supplies will be immediately transported and distributed across Tigray, where conflict has forced an estimated one million people to flee their homes.

Fighting in Tigray broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - the Tigray People's Liberation Front - of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm an anti-government militia. International human rights groups have alleged possible grave crimes in Tigray against civilians, including committed by Eritrean troops.

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US Removes Switzerland, Vietnam From Currency Manipulator List – Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – The United States has removed Switzerland and Vietnam from its so-called monitoring list of countries manipulating their currency values but will continue engagement with these governments and start similar talks with Taiwan on exchange rate practices, the Treasury Department said on Friday.

"Treasury has determined that there is insufficient evidence to make a finding that Vietnam, Switzerland, or Taiwan manipulates its exchange rate for either of the purposes referenced in the 1988 Act," the department said in a press release. "Treasury will continue its enhanced engagement with Vietnam and Switzerland, and Treasury will commence enhanced engagement with Taiwan."

The Treasury also found that 11 US major trading partners — China, Japan, Korea, Germany, Ireland, Italy, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Mexico — should remain on the departments "Monitoring List" due to their national currencies exchange rates practices, the release added.

The department also urged China to increase transparency of its foreign exchange interventions, the policy objectives of its exchange rate management regime, and the relationship between the central bank and foreign exchange activities of the state-owned banks, the release also said.

The Trump administration added Vietnam and Switzerland to the US monitoring list in December 2020, with then-Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin saying the two countries' manipulation of their currencies had resulted in "unfair trade advantages."

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on Ugandan Officials for 'Undermining' Elections – Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – The United States has imposed visa restrictions on Uganda officials who it believes "undermined" the country's democracy including during this year's general election, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"Today I am announcing visa restrictions on those believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic process in Uganda, including during the country's January 14 general elections and the campaign period that preceded it," Blinken said in a statement. Blinken also warned that Washington would consider taking further actions against any Ugandan officials and their immediate family members who have been "complicit in undermining democracy and human rights" in the country.

The top US diplomat accused Uganda's government of violating of basic human rights and perpetuating a downward trajectory for democracy in the country.

"Opposition candidates were routinely harassed, arrested, and held illegally without charge. Ugandan security forces were responsible for the deaths and injuries of dozens of innocent bystanders and opposition supporters, as well as violence against journalists that occurred before, during, and after the elections," Blinken said.

In January, Uganda conducted an election in which President Yoweri Museveni was declared the winner. Opposition leader Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as Bobi Wine, disputed the results as fraudulent.